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Symbolizing Borders: Swedish Travels into the Soviet Union during the 1930's

Charlotte Tornbjør

Travelling means meeting new and different cultures, and crossing different kinds of borders, both mental and physical, is part of the travelling experience. In this article I will investigate how Swedish travellers during the inter-war period conceptualized national borders. What did they experience when they crossed the border? Did these borders symbolize something more in the minds of the travellers? And finally, is it obvious that national borders are experienced as borders also in mind?¹

The inter-war years were a period of travelling. Paul Fussell suggests that this yearning to travel was connected to the experiences of the First World War and the terror and feeling of narrowing horizons it had produced.² People wanted to get out and see the world, and Swedish writers and journalists were no exception. They went everywhere; to Europe, to the US, to Africa and to Asia. Improved communications facilitated travelling, and a body of travel books was generated to mediate the experience of the travellers.³ In this article I will focus on the Swedish journeys in the Soviet Union. The country symbolized a different political and social system, and therefore one can suppose that the Soviet borders were even more distinguished than many other national borders which the travellers crossed during their journeys. The source material for this study is published travelogues written by Swedish travellers during the inter-war period. The focus, however, is on the travelogues written during the 1930s – an especially turbulent decade starting with the crash in 1929.

In 1933, Hitler seized power in Germany, and during the same decade Stalin strengthened his position in the Soviet Union by extreme terror.

¹ This study is a part of my research project *Travelling into the Future: Swedish Travellers in Search of a Better Society* which has been financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, 2005–2008.

² Fussell 1982 pp. 3-8.

³ Kylhammar 1994 pp. 17-51.

Dictatorships threatened democracy almost everywhere.⁴ The Swedish travellers were fully aware of the critical circumstances, and sometimes the travellers reflected upon these questions when they crossed national borders. Sometimes they did not. However, as readers of the travelogues we have to keep in mind that travel-writing is a special kind of writing. It is somehow a 'mediation between fact and fiction'.⁵ The writers often freely intersperse their actual experiences with fictitious stories, and the travel narratives are also infused with the writers' subjectivity.⁶ A fruitful approach could therefore be to comprehend 'travel writing as occupying a space of discursive conflict.'⁷

The travellers to Soviet were prepared to meet a different kind of society. The revolution had swept away the old regime, and in its ruins a new socialist society was about to be built. The travellers were politicians, writers and just curious ordinary people, wanting to see the changes with their own eyes. In the years immediately following the revolution there were mostly Swedish socialists who visited the new country. Many of them also had personal relationships with some of the Russian revolutionaries.⁸

In the middle of the 1920s, the flow of tourists and travellers increased. This was not just a Swedish phenomenon; people from all over the world wanted to visit the Soviet Union, and both historians and sociologists have studied these travellers from a number of perspectives, although, the conceptualizing of the national border itself has never been the main focus of interest. In particular the so-called 'political pilgrims' and their motives have been analyzed. The term itself is connected to Paul Hollander's well-known book *Political Pilgrims* in which he analyzes why otherwise critically thinking intellectuals could visit the Soviet Union and honour Soviet society and government. Why did they not see the terror and oppression? Hollander's answer is that these intellectuals had feelings of alienation towards their own societies; furthermore, their alienation was combined with a utopian vision, which envisioned social justice and harmony between society and the individual. These travellers held the conviction that intellectuals in the Soviet Union had more influence than intellectuals

⁴ Schweizer 2001 pp. 11.

⁵ Fussell 1982 p. 214.

⁶ This is especially the case regarding the travellers in the Soviet Union. See e.g. Gerner 2000 pp. 38-40; cf. Gómez 2002 p. 65-83.

⁷ Holland & Huggan 1998 pp. 8-11.

⁸ See e.g. Kan 2005 pp. 204-206.

in their own countries, and so they uncritically embraced the Soviet political system.⁹

Some of the Swedish travellers can be categorized as political pilgrims, led either by political ignorance or by conviction, but many were not. Many had different kinds of ideological or cultural connections to the Soviet Union, Russia or the Russian people; others were really sceptical of this new society.

Sweden and the Soviet Union have no common border, and the Swedish travellers had to go via a third country, for example Poland, the Baltic States or Finland, to enter the Soviet Union. The most common route was to go through Finland, but as we will see some travellers took other routes. During the 1920s, travellers sympathizing with the Soviet system often referred in their travelogues to the Soviet customs officers as 'very nice', especially in comparison to their German counterparts.¹⁰ On the other hand, travellers could also write about tough interrogations by the customs officers and the dirt in the new country.¹¹ However, even positive travellers during this decade recognized the traces of war on both sides of the border; they told their readers about ruins and bullet holes that were the consequences of the First World War and the following civil war.¹²

Many of the travellers did not write explicitly about the national border, and they did not verbalize their feelings. Does that mean that these travellers did not see the national border as something special? It is hard to say, because the only traces we can analyze are their written accounts, and if there is nothing written about crossing the border, nothing can be concluded. Those who actually wrote about the national border, however, often made it into a symbol of the differences between the Soviet socialist system and the Western capitalist world. The communist Ture Nerman entered the country by train from Poland. This border, he said, was the border between capitalist Europe and the country where the workers ruled. He was happy and sang to himself when he was entering the Soviet Union.¹³

Bengt Idestam-Almquist was another traveller, and he saw the national border not only as a border between two political systems but as a symbol

⁹ Hollander 1981; see also Caute 1988 and Jensen 1984.

¹⁰ See e.g. Nerman 1930 pp. 12-22.

¹¹ See e.g. von Rosen 1926 pp. 8-12.

¹² Nerman 1930 p. 130.

¹³ Nerman 1930 pp. 263-264. The Russians he met in the new country were, according to him, smiling and innocent.

of the differences between the Russian and the Swedish people. He was a well-known writer and above all a film critic during the inter-war period. In his travelogue from 1932 he mixes the past, the present and the future in a very intricate way. He entered the Soviet Union from Finland as so many other tourists and travellers did, and for him the national border was not just a geographical place. It was also a border of memory in his mind. He had had the ambition to travel around by car in the Soviet Union, because he and a friend of his wanted to go camping. They had done so on their way from Stockholm to Finland, and when the rain was pouring down outside the tent, Idestam-Almquist remembered his former visits in old Russia. He had spent his childhood and some years during the war in St Petersburg. In the rain, memories from Imperial Russia and the years of the revolution came to his mind.¹⁴ When they continued their way to the Soviet Union, he and his friend also made a stop in the Finnish village Terijoki. This was the place where the Russian aristocracy had had their summer villas, but now everything was in decay.¹⁵ The changes the Russian revolution had led to had also affected the Finnish landscape, and the expected ruins started already in Finland. In that sense the border was not so distinct; the decay started long before the frontier station. Later on, however, Idestam-Almquist admitted that on the other side of the border the ruins had turned into something positive. When Idestam-Almquist and his friend actually reached the Soviet border, they realized that it was not possible to go by car in the Soviet Union. It would have been too expensive, because they would have been obliged to pay a heavy import duty to bring the car into the country.¹⁶

The Finnish border station was named Rajajoki and the Soviet station was named Beloostrov. Between them runs the little river Systerbäck. When Idestam-Almquist stood there waiting to enter the Soviet Union, he started to remember once more. The last time he was there was in 1922. At that time, when he was looking at the other side of the border, he just felt disgust. The only thing he saw was a field of ruins, and everything was poor and dirty. He compared what he saw with the Russia of his childhood, and he shivered with disgust. At that moment, he was almost the only person to enter the Soviet Union, because almost nobody was allowed in. At the so-called train station, more or less a shed, the train stopped. He was surprised that no-one helped him with his luggage. He concluded that Russians were

¹⁴ Idestam-Almquist ('Robin Hood') 1932 pp. 7-34.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* pp. 29-34.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 35.

not curious any longer, and he saw hunger in their eyes.¹⁷ He continued to reminisce about his last visit, and in those days Leningrad had been a dead city. He had just seen ruins, and the people had seemed to be hungry and poor.¹⁸

Ten years after he wondered how things had changed. The first impression he had now was how different everything looked. The dirt and the apathy were gone; there was another air, another feeling. Now he felt both energy and happiness in the air. He saw women and men working together, and everywhere he found planted flowers. Idestam-Almquist was relieved; people who cared for flowers were alive. Even the secret police were nice young boys, he stated.¹⁹

Even if Idestam-Almquist sympathized with the new Soviet Union, one could not classify him as a genuine political pilgrim. In his travelogue, the border in 1932 pointed to a new time, a new time compared to both the old Russia and the years of the revolution. Somehow the border also symbolized a mixture of old and modern times. Maybe he was not aware of it when he crossed the border, but as one reads further on in his travelogue, it becomes clear to him. He stated that modern times in Russia were completely Russian. He appreciated many of the new reforms in the state, but he was also aware of the oppression. Idestam-Almquist loved the Russian people and saw the new Soviet system as offering hope for a new Russian future. He did not, however, see communism as a Russian force. He maintained that two lines of development went on in Russia; the first was communism, which strived for equality. The second line was the unknown destiny of Russia. Sometimes the two lines had cooperated, but Idestam-Almquist was not sure it would continue this way. Russia was special, and maybe the country needed a period of hard revolutionary government to be able to flourish in all its glory in a near future. Maybe the harsh Soviet system would mean a new kind of mixture of capitalism and communism, something modern and at the same time very Russian?²⁰

Other travellers were more pessimistic. Though the Swedish actress Pauline Brunius crossed the border and the river Systerbäck in 1934, two years after Idestam-Almquist, her experience was similar to Bengt Idestam-

¹⁷ Idestam-Almquist 1932 pp. 36f.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* pp. 40f.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* p. 38.

²⁰ *Op. cit.* pp. 225-230. Even travellers that did not know much about Russian culture were fascinated by the mixture of an old romantic Russia and the country of Lenin, see e.g. Quensel 1926 p. 11.

Almquist's of 1922. She stood watching the other side, and the first thing she saw were women participating in shooting practice. They turned their backs against Systerbäck, but it was easy to imagine them aiming at Finland. Furthermore, she saw red flags and ruined houses, and she observed small women with spades and bundles. She did not think that the people starved, but she could not see many men working in the fields.²¹ She really felt that this was a different country, and even if she later in her travelogue praised Soviet cultural policy, she really could not identify with the Soviet people.²² In that, she agreed with Idestam-Almquist.

The Swedish author Marika Stiernstedt travelled in the Soviet Union about the same time as Pauline Brunius. She also had experiences from old Russia; relatives had lived there whom she had visited as a child. None of her relatives lived there any longer, but still, she was eager to see how the revolution had turned out. She now hoped that the insecurity was gone and that the people finally had freedom of speech. She was, she said, prepared for a positive experience.²³ Stiernstedt entered the Soviet Union from Poland, and already in Stolpce, the last Polish station, she got suspicious of the new administration in Russia. In this little Polish village the Red Cross had arranged aid for refugees, who were coming by train from Soviet camps and prisons. Stiernstedt does not say much about the border itself, but she and her company felt depressed when entering the Soviet train.²⁴ Not until arriving in Moscow, does she give the reader her first impressions of the Soviet Union, which were housing shortage, poverty and high prices.²⁵ Already in Poland she somehow had felt the coming oppression in the Soviet Union. The border between Poland and the Soviet Union was, in Stiernstedt's view, a place of refugees and desperation.²⁶ Her first impressions of the Soviet border were also her conclusion of her whole visit in Moscow. She was disappointed and asked herself whether the few instances of progress could legitimate the tyranny.²⁷

Marika Stiernstedt entered the Soviet Union with her brother Erik Stjernstedt who intended to visit a Red Cross conference in Japan. His

²¹ Brunius 1934 p. 11

²² *Op. cit.* pp. 16f, 24-30.

²³ Stiernstedt 1935 pp. 7-10.

²⁴ *Op. cit.* pp. 10f.

²⁵ *Op. cit.* p. 11.

²⁶ This is not an uncommon way of seeing the borderland, cf. Arreola 2005. He discusses the border between the US and Mexico in cinema.

²⁷ Stiernstedt 1935 pp. 22f.

impression of the border was actually a non-impression, since they travelled in a comfortable train that was as good as an ordinary Western train. He admitted, however, that the speed of the train could have been higher. For him the border itself was not an obvious marker between two cultures, and he did not realize he was in the new Soviet Union until he reached Moscow. In the rest of his reports from the journey, he describes his impressions from the train window.²⁸

In 1937, the writers Gustaf Hellström and Ivar Harrie travelled in the Soviet Union together with some other Swedish journalists. They also entered the Soviet Union from Finland. Gustaf Hellström's first impression was similar to that of Marika Stjernstedt. He saw depression and melancholy, and he asked himself if this really was the place where modern man could be studied. He was sceptical.²⁹ Later on in his account he was more positive about the reforms, but the people and the life in the Soviet Union were still different from the Swedish way of life, and Soviet development was not desirable from a Swedish point of view.³⁰

Ivar Harrie did not write about entering the Soviet Union; on the contrary, he discussed his exit. The strange feeling of relief, he said, was often described when people were taking the train back to Finland across the river Systerbäck. Harrie felt the same. In Finland he was back in Scandinavia, and he felt safe. In Scandinavia you had freedom of speech, and your thoughts were respected. For him the true community was Nordic, and the Finnish-Russian border conceptualized the differences between the Nordic and Russian cultures. The Russians were different, and that was, for example, the reason why accused politicians in the Moscow Trials in 1937 confessed their guilt instead of protesting against the terror.³¹

For many Swedish travellers the river Systerbäck really symbolized the border between *Them* and *Us*. In the Soviet Union they had a communist system, quite different from the capitalistic Western countries. If you sympathized with the system, you could feel relief on the border, but if you were critical, you noticed decay, hunger, oppression and despair. But in the Soviet Union, the Russians lived, and they were another kind of people. They needed other things than Scandinavians; they were a mystic people with their own priorities. The writer Anna Lenah Elgström made it clear that this difference was both ideological and cultural. She describes in her

²⁸ Stjernstedt 1935.

²⁹ Hellström 1937 pp. 25f.

³⁰ *Op. cit.* pp. 90-97, 127, 144f, 167f, 179, 181.

³¹ Harrie 1938 pp. 79-98. Cf. Quensel 1926 pp. 234f.

travelogue two different kinds of women in the Soviet Union, and these women also became symbols of the entire nation.³² As an example she described her two different Soviet guides. The guide in Leningrad was ascetic and worked very hard, even if she had a fever and a cough. She had no youth, no female desire of happiness and no tenderness. It was, Elgström wrote, like all femininity was left behind on the other side of the river Systerbäck. This woman was not a communist, but still she symbolized the new ideological woman who never thought of herself and worked hard for community. On the other hand, the guides in Moscow were like oriental odalisques, both negligent and inconsiderate. They symbolized the Asian and barbaric side of the Soviet Union, and this image was not positive. Obviously, Elgström preferred the first kind of woman, even if this woman was also very different compared to women in Scandinavia; the river Systerbäck was in her account made into a distinct borderline that conceptualized the differences between Scandinavia and the Soviet Union. Her conclusion was that women in the Soviet Union were part of another world; they lived another kind of life.³³

Another Swedish woman, writing in the liberal newspaper *Tidevarvet*, understood the border and the river Systerbäck differently than Elgström. She meant that the border was far too complicated to cross. The Finnish frontier guards were too slow, but when you had crossed the border, soldiers from the Red Army smiled and greeted you. Even for her the border was a distinct line between two worlds, but she was far more enthusiastic than Elgström, seeing a country where people were building a new society, a country full of hope and energy. For example, the women did not care for fashion; instead they were engaged in important things in real society. However, there were still things reminiscent of the old world to be found in the new country.³⁴

The Soviet border was the dividing line between something well-known and the unknown. If the travellers sympathized with the new communist government, they felt joy and saw a new country full of hope and energy. The Western countries symbolized instead an obsolete society. If the travellers were more negative, they could emphasize the Asiatic and barbaric traits in the new country. In some cases they saw both trends on the other side of the border. Anna Lenah Elgström is an excellent example of that. In

³² She was not the only one who saw the woman as a symbol of another nation, see Tornbjør 2008 pp. 108-112.

³³ Elgström 1932 pp. 11-24.

³⁴ Hermelin 1934.

any case, the national border became the distinct borderline between *Them* and *Us*. The view of the border itself conceptualized the travellers' view of everything on the other side. The national border was not just a political borderline; it also became a mental border, and everything strange and unknown on the other side was connected to the fact that it happened there.

The travellers' conceptualization of the border did not, however, happen in a no man's land. The travellers were teeming with prejudices and images of the Soviet Union, of communism, of Russia and of the Russian people. These images naturally penetrated their own conceptualization of the national border. Earlier research has emphasized that there were two distinct discourses dealing with the conceptions of the Soviet Union in Sweden during the inter-war period. There was one romantic discourse in which the Soviet Union was comprehended as an extension of old Russia. Russia was Asia, and people who lived there were of different than the people of Scandinavia or Europe. The second discourse emphasized the rational trait in the Soviet Union. The country was about to develop into an industrial and rational model state.³⁵ You can see traces of both of these discourses in the travelogues, but no matter which discourse dominates, the national border was seen as a distinct borderline between *Them* and *Us*. In some cases the other side is seen as a model and in others as a threat, but the travellers who wrote about the national border did not think that the border could unite the two opposite sides; instead, it still defined us from each other. The border can in this sense be seen as a marker of identification. However, where was the identification? In the above-mentioned examples the travellers identified themselves with a vague Western society or Europe, sometimes Scandinavia and sometimes also Sweden. The Other was always the Soviet Union or Russia, either the country was seen as a rational, progressive and communist society on its way into a better future, or as a backward, Asian and barbaric country. The border itself made this definition visible, and maybe this is the reason why many of the travellers wrote about their feelings and observations when they crossed the line.

Actually, this is not the only way borderlines can be conceptualized. Borders can be negotiated, and regions can be created across them. One example is the Baltic region or the Öresund region. Earlier research indicates that borders can be constructed and reconstructed in different

³⁵ Westlund 2002 pp. 20-55; Leth 2005 pp. 85-140; Blomqvist 2003 pp 13-38; Gerner 1996 pp. 307-333; Gerner 2005 pp. 19-49.

ways, and that this depends on the person who reflects upon the border.³⁶ There is a long tradition of regarding Russia (and Eastern Europe) as the Other of Western Europe. Russia has been seen as barely civilized compared to Western Europe.³⁷ This tradition continued after the Bolshevik assumption of power. The differences in political and ideological systems were too many between the Soviet Union and any of the European countries. Even if the national borders were questioned (and they never were in the analyzed travelogues), it did not matter. The border itself still symbolized the conflict between these different systems, either you liked the other side or not.³⁸

The national border was not always clearly visible for the travellers. All travellers mentioned above crossed the border at a guarded frontier station. There are, however, some examples when people crossed the Finnish-Russian border in a more unorganised way. Alfred Badlund, a Swedish communist, failed the first time he illegally tried to get into the Soviet Union. He and his friend had been going round in circles, when the Finnish police caught them. The next time they succeeded, but even if Badlund did not recognize the border itself, he realized that he was in the Soviet Union when he and his friend met Soviet soldiers.³⁹ They were both very disappointed by the Soviet system; instead of finding a workers' paradise, they were put into prison, and later on they were moved to a camp in Siberia. The Soviet administration accused them of being spies.⁴⁰ Badlund managed to flee, and he was relieved when he finally reached the Swedish legation.⁴¹ Badlund himself did not experience the border as a distinct line, but notwithstanding he saw Sweden and the Soviet Union as two heterogeneous cultures, and somehow the borderland became the symbol of the differences. Neither the laws nor the political systems were the same in the two countries, and the positive attitude he had when he entered the Soviet Union was gone after a few weeks in the country.

³⁶ See e.g. Nilsson, Sanders & Stubbegaard 2007 pp. 8f.

³⁷ Wolff 1994. However, Martin E. Malia states that when Russian development was the same as in Europe, the Europeans had a positive view of the nation. It was through the Bolshevik assumption of power, Russia was constituted as the Other of Europe, Malia 1999.

³⁸ Cf. Schlögel 2003 pp. 137f.

³⁹ Badlund 1935 pp. 48f.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.* pp. 56f, 94.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.* pp. 231f.

The described border in the travelogues was a political borderline, a distinct line that separated two defined states from each other. However, borders are, as I mentioned above, not given, and national borders have frequently been changed during history. The border between Poland and Russia has for example been disputed for centuries. The border between Finland and Russia has also been changed. After the Finnish Winter War in 1939, Finland lost the frontier station where most of the Swedish travellers entered the Soviet Union, but the travellers did not discuss the border in this sense. Instead they saw it as an obvious demarcation that separated two different cultures from each other. The following events during and after the Second World War show that it was not always that easy. Borders can be changed and so can how they are experienced.

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